



# Bloodied Rivers of Kashmir

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### Valley of Tears 1989

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Violence escalated last week in the Kashmir valley, where militant separatist struggle has been gathering strength for the last one year. Most grievances relate to corruption, and

an insensitive administration. But above all, the people feel their democratic voice is being stifled by a manipulative Centre.

Inderjit Badhwar

May 31, 1989 |

A tidal wave of protest that has engulfed the valley began to peak last week as a “Quit Kashmir” hartal paralysed life in major cities. Srinagar should have been bustling with tourists, but a graveyard-like silence took hold. The hartal was only the latest manifestation of a continuing agitation, separatist in its outward expression and pro-Pakistani in its extreme form. Demonstrations and police firings have claimed some 50 lives in the last year – more than in any period in the last two decades.

Not since August 1953, when Sheikh Abdullah was arrested and jailed on subversion charges, and hundreds of people were killed or incarcerated as valley-wide protests erupted, has Kashmir seen such an outburst of separatist frenzy. As veteran Congress(I) leader Trilochan Dutta put it: “It seems as if the pro-plebiscite movement has been revived.”

But there is one vital difference: the militants, mostly young and unemployed, or petty shopkeepers, are fighting with fancy guns and sophisticated bombs. Mercifully, however, they have not yet learnt to kill. They have still not tasted blood. But that, police sources say, is not far away. Last February a group of militants opened fire with Kalashnikovs on the house of DIG A.M. Watali. Last week militants bombed a double-decker bus in Srinagar’s exclusive Residency Road, and the house of a deputy commissioner in Bemina in a government housing colony. And then soon afterwards detonated a powerful bomb on the swank Boulevard, displaying conclusively that they had spread their strike range to well beyond the ghettos.



## Blast victim

A deputy superintendent of police, in charge of one of the newly formed commando units, who had faced an irate mob in the old city’s ghetto area in which several youths were injured in police firing, said: “They have lost their fear. They stand right in front of your guns and dare you

to shoot them. How can you fight people like these? In the past the most they did was pelt stones or set off crude home-made bombs and then ducked for cover. This behaviour is new, it is almost un-Kashmiri.”

Last week, in the Shamaswari Mohalla in the old city, Shoaib Mohammed, 19, an unemployed undergraduate visits the house of a friend and tells his mother, Fatima, that her worries are over. Guns have arrived from “*paar*” (across the border, as they refer to Pakistan) and the youth will fight back against the arrests and detentions and midnight knocks that have become a regular feature of life in the valley’s cities. Fatima is disbelieving. Shoaib whips out a revolver and looses off a shot. The bullet ricochets in the room and hits Fatima in the ear. Shoaib hurries her down, hails an autorickshaw, transports her to a hospital and then quietly escapes.

Shoaib’s exploit spreads through the mohallas like wildfire. People react with disbelief, then sympathy and even adulation. For the militants are rapidly becoming heroes and legends. And martyrs. Secretly admired not just by the streetwise lumpen of the cities’ endless ghettos, but also by intellectuals and businessmen who discuss their exploits over scotch and soda.

Says Shariq Ali, an exporter of Kashmiri namdas and handicrafts: “We’ve always had a slave mentality. Now there’s a secret feeling of pride that the slaves are fighting back.” In Kahnyar and Naidkadal, where a pitched battle took place in April during a four-day hartal following the death of the father of People’s League leader Shabir Shah in police custody, the “*nawjawans*” who had fired at the police with Kalashnikovs were carried on the shoulders of admiring mobs who showered them with kisses and milk in traditional Kashmiri revelry style.

There’s a new feeling of machismo. A psychic compulsion that seems to override economic concerns about the effect of this new-fangled extremism on the valley’s trade and commerce. Abdul Amin, a shikarawala on Dal lake, says he used to take in as much as Rs 300 a day during a good season. In the last 10 days he has made Rs 50. Doesn’t it anger him that the rowdies are hurting Kashmir’s Rs 500-crore tourist industry? Says he, phlegmatically: “It hurts, but what can you do. People are angry about corruption and police excesses. Unless there’s a good, fair government, tourism will always suffer.”



## Police picket at LalChowk:paradiselost

In Srinagar’s Maisuma Bazaar, Ashiq Hussein, 18, an unemployed son of a taxi driver went from hero to martyr in one year, after the police held him in jail for interrogation for six months, suspecting him of manufacturing bombs. Two months ago, he was shot through the heart by a police bullet during a demonstration. His grandmother Rahti and his mother Hameeda, who live

in a crowded tenement, still cradle his photograph and wail with grief. “He was a good boy,” shrieks Hameeda. “He liked to play cricket and carrom. And just before he was shot he had been promised a government job. Life has become so cheap. We spit on Farooq Abdullah.”

Maisuma is typical of Kashmir’s ghettos. Serpentine alleys. Garbage-choked drains that empty into the Jhelum. Sheep, dogs, cattle mixing with children who tote toy guns. Suffocation. The locality is known for the bravery of its women who took to the streets for Sheikh Abdullah when he was battling the Dogra rulers and later, during the post-1953 plebiscite movement. If you said anything against the Sheikh’s family in public, chances were you’d be lynched. Today the same could happen if you praise that family.

“Look around you,” says Mazoor Ahmed, 28, a shopkeeper in the area. “For 40 years, despite promises, there’s been no improvement. Everything is filthier, grimier. There are no jobs. To enter engineering or medical colleges officials are bribed with Maruti cars. When we protest we are branded terrorists. Our MLA has not even visited us once.”

“Why should he?” asks Jehangir Ahmed, 22, a student. “He stole our votes. This entire area voted in 1987 for a Muslim United Front (MUF) candidate. We wanted a change, an end to corruption. They captured booths ruthlessly and then arrested our candidate. They’ve ruined us. We will never forgive them.” The refrain is universal.

Mohammed Yaseen Malik, 22, is also from Maisuma. He was a die-hard MUF activist during the assembly election campaign. He sports an Imran Khan hairstyle, and has intense, burning eyes. He was involved in several protest demonstrations last year – was arrested, beaten up, viciously abused. He had a congenital heart ailment that needed treatment. When the authorities refused to get him medical help he went on a hunger fast which led to his release.

He said in an interview shortly after leaving jail: “They gave me no reasons. They spat on me. They locked me in a small cage. They called me a Pakistani bastard. I told them I wanted my rights, my vote was stolen. I was not pro-Pakistani but had lost faith in India.” Today, along with Shabir Shah, Ashfaq Majid, Javed Ahmed Mir, and Hamid Sheikh, Yaseen is on the police’s most wanted list with a price of Rs 30,000 on his head. According to sources he has fled to a training camp in Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir (POK).



## Bomb explosion destroys bus

Afzal Shah (not his real name), 22, is a tailor in Baramulla district. Burn marks on his left thigh administered by hot iron rods and cigarette burns on his forehead and left shoulder attest to his recent three months in police custody. He was arrested in Srinagar shortly after intelligence

agencies identified him as having crossed the border last year for a five-month training stint. He is now out on bail, and faces charges of crossing the border illegally. Police corruption in the state is so high that bail in such cases can be arranged for a Rs 10,000 under-the-table payment to a local police official.

“I crossed over at midnight from the Uri border,” says Afzal with a smile. Then his aquiline. Afghan-like features, nestling beneath a bush of curly hair parted down the middle, turn dead serious. “It was easy. I paid a Gujjar tribesman Rs 500 to show me the way. It was a long walk through the forest.” What did he do there? “Tailoring,” he answers with a smile. Then, he adds quietly: “I gave the police no information. Absolutely nothing.” Why did he cross? “They don’t want democracy to survive here. So I have to support the Kashmir Liberation Front (KLF).”

According to police sources, the two most active groups whose ideology alternates between seeking an independent Kashmir and aligning with Pakistan, are the POK-based KLF headed by Amanullah and the People’s League. The die-hard anti-India ideologues are Dr Farouk Hyderi and R. Muzzafar. These groups, so far unable to do more than engage in cross-border propaganda campaigns through leaflets, received a boost after the 1987 elections when disgruntled youth who had been jailed before and after the campaign and who believed that the entire polls had been rigged against the MUF – the umbrella organisation of fundamentalists, disgruntled Congressites, and anti-Farooq Abdullah and anti-accord forces – began crossing the border to enlist in these organisations.

Until 1987. and this even Watali, the DIG at Kashmir admitted in a conversation, there was no such training and certainly no guns. Today, anywhere between 500 to 1,000 youths from Srinagar, Badgam, Kupwara, Baramulla, and Anantnag have received training. Between October 1988 and April this year more than 100 – including 45 from Kupwara alone – have been arrested after their return and nearly 100 automatic weapons, pistols, and Chinese-made bombs recovered. Said one police officer who has made some 30 arrests: “The weapons were so strange to us we had to rely on the captured extremists to demonstrate to us how they are used.”

The training period in Pakistan, interrogations reveal, lasts between 10 and 20 days during which recruits are given crash courses in firing light machine-guns and pistols, and making and using bombs. “The groups are compartmentalised,” explained an official who has interrogated several activists. “They are put in batches of four and each is given a code name and code address, so if one is caught he does not know the names of the others. They are not yet hardcore. They are disillusioned and alienated and I think at this point they can be rehabilitated with proper policies. But this could be the beginning of a terrorist phase because most of those arrested have had guns recovered from them.”



# Boy with Islamic flag seeks donations

But so far as Wazir Ahmed (not his real name) is concerned, “the battle for liberation” – whatever that might mean – has already begun. He is a rugged-faced youth of 22 with a scar across his forehead and wrinkles forming prematurely at the corners of his eyes. Wearing a crewcut and a denim jacket, he is known as a local “commander” in one of the old city neighbourhoods. On the Friday before Id, he comes to the Jama Masjid across the centuries-old Nawahatta chowk. Sitting on the masjid’s sprawling grounds along with some 2.5 lakh people gathered there, he says: “If they think they’ve captured all the guns, they’re mistaken.” Is he ready to die? “Of course.” For Pakistan? “Not for Pakistan, not for India. For independence.” Why not try the democracy you already have? “We’ve tried it. It doesn’t work. For us, all politicians are fakes, liars, thieves. We will make sure that the entire valley boycotts the next election.” Through violence? “If the need arises.”

It is obvious that even the moderate politicians – most of them opportunistic to the core – have sensed this feeling and, afraid of being rendered inconsequential, are trying to cash in on it. On the day of the *Jumma namaaz*, Maulana Farouq, the Mirwaiz of the north, who had patched up with Farooq Abdullah for the 1987 election, and then broke with him a year ago thundered at his nearly three lakh congregation in Srinagar’s Jama Masjid that the time had come for Kashmiris to “confront every oppressive move made by the Centre”. And in a burst of oratorical fury he asked the Kashmiris to question whether they would spend their money on buying VCRs or guns.

The massive *namaaz* was preceded by the reading of an honour roll of the valley’s youth who have been killed in police firings over the last few months. The Maulana calls them martyrs of Kashmir and the congregation prays for their souls. On the pathway to the mosque, hawkers hawk portraits of General Zia-ul-Haq for Rs 2 a piece along with newspapers containing pictures of people killed in the various agitations.

Around the Jama Masjid lie nests of slums whose inhabitants are small traders in cement and crockery, carpet weavers, handicraft artisans, butchers and *wazas* (Kashmiri chefs). Past Safikadal, where Kalashnikovs were first used by militants, past the Nawakadal bridge, a favourite bomb target of the militants, lie Rajourikadal, the Mirwaiz’s stronghold, Borikadal, Kahnyar and Naidkadal. All today referred to as ‘*Chhota Pakistan*’.





# Jamaat teachers

The youth of these areas have christened various mohallas with code names like Khalistan, Baluchistan, Palestine. In the centre of this area is what the militants label their Akal Takht, a neighbourhood called Zainakadal.

Compared to the main shopping areas of Srinagar, the hopelessly congested and claustrophobic areas of Lal Chowk and Badshah Chowk, where khaki uniforms form the backdrop of every activity, the Zainakadal area is virtually free of police. Shopkeepers and artisans talk freely about creating Pakistan or 'liberating' Kashmir. Last month a pitched battle took place here. A painter's shop, owned by Mohammad Amin, was riddled with 22 bullet holes. One made its way through the chin of a portrait of the poet Iqbal. Says Mushtaq, a shopkeeper, pointing to an unpaved road: "This is our *parikrama* leading to our Akal Takht. It is here that the Indians will have to mount Operation Red Star. But we are not afraid. When you come here next year you will have to bring your passport." And the crowd around him intones in chorus: "*Inshallah*."

Mention the name of Farooq Abdullah and the eyes turn murderous. "He is a disco dancer," they say. "He develops golf courses and cable cars while we go to hell. Our weavers and artisans starve, and he and his ministers steal all the money. And when we protest he shoots us and throws us in jail." And it is in neighbourhoods such as these in large parts of south Kashmir – in the Jamaat-dominated Sopore, in Anantnag, in the backward hill district of Kupwara where people eke out subsistence existences – that the youth have begun to form "suicide squads" aimed at ushering in what is being whispered about as a "Quit Kashmir movement".

Sub-groups, owing partial or organisational allegiance to the People's League and the KLF have emerged in the neighbourhoods: Al Fatah; Al Jihad; Victory Commandos; Jaanbaaz Force; Maqbool Force. And taking a lead from Punjab, they have begun to issue regular press releases and even extortion notes. All this is a far cry from the traditional image of the Kashmiri – the man referred to by his masters as "*hutton*" (you there); the well-dressed dandy who could not even bear to see the sight of a slaughtered chicken.



## Zia's pictures sell in Sopore

Says People's Conference leader Abdul Ghani Lone who was himself once considered a radical firebrand: "The sad thing is that moderate leadership is now being finished. Our youths now prefer to listen to the sound of the gun rather than even to my voice. There are no longer any institutions here, no political heroes." Some 40 per cent of the valley's population is between 20 and 30 years of age. Even during the Sheikh's time when agitations, like the one in 1964 following the theft of the Prophet's hair, turned virulently anti-Indian, stalwarts like Maulana Saeed of Gandherbal, and Moiuddin Kara, and Maulana Masoodi, were able to contain it or change its direction. Today, these elders admit, they are unable to influence the youths who harbour a universal sense of betrayal by all political leaders.

Before the 1987 elections Qazi Nissar, the once-extremist preacher from Anantnag – the Mirwaiz of the south – was one such hero. A man to whom youths paid heed. Nissar had moderated his stand, joined the MUF and urged people to use the electoral process. He says: "The same youths I brought into the political process now abuse me. I do not know how to answer them. *jab inko apni bhook aur izzat ka gusset ata hai to woh Pakistani nare lagate hain*. (Each time anger over injured self-respect or hunger-pangs wells up, they break into pro-Pakistan slogans.) But their real anger is about jobs – every third person here is unemployed. About not being represented beyond Class IV employment in Central government departments. About rampant corruption and the failure of the Government to usher in any development. About the violation of civil rights. Kids below 10 have been arrested under the anti-terrorism Act."

But why all this anger now? Why do the Kashmiris rage? With subsidies close to Rs 800 crore a year, aren't they a spoiled, communal, fundamentalist lot? These troubling questions are being asked all over the country. There are no definite answers but the benchmarks and trouble spots are glaringly evident. The immediate cause for the anger and violence – even Farooq's ministers now readily admit – is the universal belief, not without foundation, that the election was rigged. The atmosphere in Kashmir today resembles that in Pakistan in the aftermath of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto rigging the election.





# Seized Kalashnikov

Before, during, and after the election, party workers, polling agents and counting agents of opposition parties were arrested and jailed. Youths and students – in thousands – who demonstrated against the rigging were imprisoned or charged under various detention laws. Most Kashmiris who had simply not accepted Farooq's alliance with the Congress(I) – they considered it an opportunistic power grab – joined the MUF in a protest movement that was anti the Sheikh's family, and anti-corruption.

Farooq's government has routinely branded all protesters and demonstrators as fundamentalist and pro-Pakistani even though many of the demonstrations had clear economic reasons, such as last year's anti-electricity tariff agitation, and the agitation against the Government's import into the state of fungus-infested flour that resulted in thousands falling sick. Opposition politicians who protested against what they called 'chewing gum atta' were detained under anti-terrorist laws. And as the Government began to lose its legitimacy Kashmiri youths began to see Farooq merely a willing instrument of undemocratic Central rule and the agitations began turning anti-India. India, they believe, discriminates against Kashmir because it is the only Muslim majority state.

Actually, the current agitation draws most of its support – as did the movement under Sheikh Abdullah in the past – from five districts: Karnah, Baramulla, Srinagar, Badgam, and Anantnag where the bulk of Kashmiri-speaking Muslims reside. As an ethnic or linguistic entity they number about 16 lakh of the state's 32 lakh Muslims. The rest are Gujjars, Pahadis and Punjabis from areas like Doda, Poonch, Uri and Karnah who have neither participated too actively in the Sheikh's movement nor in pro-Pakistani stirs. The Sheikh, in fact, looked down on these groups because he feared they would dilute the numbers of Kashmiri-speaking Muslims.



## Amin's bullet-ridden shop

But now, even Gujjars have started openly lambasting the current Government. Farooq's administration has been in a virtual state of collapse. His ministers have been charged with massive corruption and Central assistance has been looted, as Prem Nath Butt, a lawyer and

leader of the 6,000-strong Hindu community from Anantnag put it, “by a coalition government of contractors, politicians and engineers. The bottom in Kashmir has always been solid. The rot has started at the top”.

While bridges, roads, culverts, hospitals, relief works, schools lie rotting, the state Government spends lavishly from Central funds on a golf course in Srinagar that despoils its forests and now cannot be completed even at a cost of Rs 10 crore, and a cable car project whose cost is expected to exceed Rs 40 crore. Both have become the symbols of elitism and of a government that would rather let its people eat cake. And while the ghettos of Srinagar, Sopore, Anantnag, Kupwara, Handwara fester – none of them has even a sewage system – in squalor, the beneficiaries of Central aid, forest lessees, contractors, government officials and politicians, build multi-crore villas in suburbs like Barzulla, Rajbagh.

The examples of corruption and waste of Central subsidies are endless: the Indira Gandhi Road from the airport incomplete after two years of work and crores in expenditure; four of Farooq’s cabinet ministers, including his revenue minister charged with corruption and nepotism – so far, no action; Rs 60 lakh spent just two years ago on the public hospital in Kupwara which is now cracking down the middle; Central subsidies spent on the Jhelum Valley Medical College where people have been paying Rs 2 lakh as the price for admission even though work is yet to begin; then the undoing of major reforms instituted by Governor Jagmohan – the cleaning of the Dal Lake, the fair recruitment board, the ban on private practice by government doctors, and pruning of the top-heavy bureaucracy.

For 22 years – from 1953 to 1975 – the Kashmiris, led by Sheikh Abdullah, were fed on an anti-Indian political diet. Theirs was a mass movement for plebiscite. In the 1977 election Sheikh Abdullah campaigned covertly on a pro-Pakistani platform because he again felt deceived by the Centre after the accord of 1975. From 1983 onwards Farooq poured hatred on India. The Indian Government labelled him a corrupt man with terrorist leanings. Two years later he shook hands with Rajiv Gandhi and made an electoral alliance with the Congress(I) that totally confused and demoralised his followers who began to wonder what they had fought for all these years.

The reason that corruption, always endemic to Kashmir, has now become such a burning issue is that during the election campaign Farooq had told his people that the only reason he had shaken hands with Delhi was to usher in a period of speedy development and an end to corruption – electricity, drains, potable water. But Kashmir remains in virtual darkness as evening falls. Even important police stations near border areas are without light.

The state’s Uri Hydel Project barely works and transmission lines from the Salaal Hydroelectric Project have still not been laid. Kashmiris have not forgotten those promises. Today the family is as discredited in Kashmir as was that of the Shah of Iran before Khomeini’s revolution. And Farooq’s response has been one of repression with the help of Delhi. The more unpopular he gets, so does Delhi, and the hope of Pakistan – offering political, psychological and mystical deliverance – dangled before the eyes of Kashmiris by most of their leaders, becomes more attractive.



## Hameeda bemoans her dead son

AS Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, now with Janata Dal, said in an interview while he was still in the Congress(I): “My feeling after the election was that the Centre and Farooq may have won an election but they had lost Kashmir.” Adds A.R. Kabuli, member of Parliament who was recently expelled from the NC: “I told Farooq during the elections, ‘If you prepare yourself for defeat and accept it, you will be legitimate. If you steal the vote there will be hell to pay.’ Never before were our youths so heavily involved in an election. Many of the terrorists of today are the graduates of the rigged election of 1987.”

Today Sheikh Abdullah’s cemetery near Hazratbal has to be guarded round the clock. As a policeman explained: “In the old days people placed wreaths here. Today there are people ready to disinter him. It’s that bad.” Where once Farooq rode the shoulders of his people to perform *Id namaaz* at Idgah, today he is surrounded by thousands of securitymen and confines himself to Hazratbal from where he declares war. Anyone with a gun, anyone even standing near a person with a gun will be shot, he thunders. All hartals will be forcefully broken up “even if it means breaking your locks”. And he threatens that Srinagar may have to be razed to the ground as was Batamaloo by the Indian Army in 1965 when raiders entered from Pakistan.

But the words ring hollow. Bringing in more troops, more police, more preventive detentions – in the absence of a fair and just administration and a political solution – will simply fan the winds of terrorism. The need of the hour is to restore the democratic process in the state by giving a fair hearing to the hundreds of election petitions that have been tiled in court challenging the 1987 poll. And a state leadership must be allowed to emerge that can communicate with the youth and be committed to massive reform. Short-term manipulations to which Kashmir has always been subjected can only lead to a long-term loss. Barring a respite in 1977, Kashmiris have never been allowed a free vote and their leaders have been recklessly created and toppled by the Centre.

The silver lining throughout Kashmir’s turbulent history is that the state, even as the rest of India burned in communal frenzy, never experienced communal violence except for a brief period in 1986 preceding Governor’s Rule. Its religious tradition has been one of Sufi tolerance as against that of the Saudi-financed Jamaat-e-Islami that subscribes to the Wahabi belief of an Islamic state. The Jamaat’s hold, however, is confined to pockets in Baramulla, and it propagates its ideology mostly through fundamentalist schools run by a tax-exempt trust.

But now, as the moderate leadership declines and the hotheads take over, minorities are beginning to feel threatened. Says Dr Avtar Krishan Ganjoo, a Kashmiri Pandit, who was municipal chairman of Sopore for nine years and who now runs a charitable medical practice

right next to the Jamaat office: “The majority community has always respected us. But something in the atmosphere is changing.”

If there is a major communal conflagration not just Kashmir but the entire country will burn. There is not much time left in which to stem the tide of extremism. And nothing will work as a better antidote to Pakistan and separatism than a heavy dose of Indian democracy. Otherwise the sentiment that Kashmir is denied its fundamental right to choose its own leaders because the rest of the country discriminates against it on the basis of religion will continue to gain currency.

And, no matter how irrational the vision, the youth of Kashmir will persist in the belief that their rights will be better safeguarded within a Muslim country like Pakistan. Kashmiri youths are beginning to learn from the tactics of Punjab militants. But the Government so far, unfortunately, seems to have become no wiser after the political lessons of Punjab. The ball today, doubtless, lies squarely in the Centre’s court.



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